Selecting and Supporting Students with Complex Texts

Implications for ELA/ELD Big Ideas and Alternative Means of Expression

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Executive Summary

This practice brief highlights guidance from the California *2014 English Language Arts/English Language Development Framework (ELA/ELD Framework*) regarding how to select and scaffold complex texts when creating learning experiences for students and designing alternative means of expression. Teachers support all students by thoughtfully selecting a wide array of complex texts, across diverse perspectives, to deliver California’s ELA and ELD standards. Additionally, selecting appropriate texts as the vehicle for teaching the ELA/ELD standards allows teachers to identify alternative means of expression that stay tied to both the standards and their required text types. Selecting and scaffolding complex texts is a critical step in designing alternative means of expression since the standards require that students engage with complex texts and students with disabilities may need varied supports, including different ways to communicate their understanding that align with both the requirements for the type of text and the competencies defined within the standards. This practice brief provides clear and practical ways teachers can choose complex texts and scaffolds that are aligned with the ELA/ELD Framework goals for students’ learning context: integrated, motivating, engaging, respectful, and intellectually challenging (California Department of Education [CDE] 2014, pp. 61–67) through the lens of providing alternative means of expression.

This practice brief offers teachers practical and straightforward recommendations for how to select and scaffold complex texts, particularly for high school students, in alignment with the California ELA/ELD Framework and providing alternative means of expression. By understanding the characteristics of complex texts, employing effective scaffolding strategies, and strategically employing alternative means of expression, teachers can enhance student comprehension, engagement, and critical thinking skills. The ability to make meaning of complex texts is crucial if students are to develop the skills and knowledge required for college and careers (CDE 2014, p. 70). They challenge students to engage with sophisticated language, diverse perspectives, and nuanced ideas. In addition to selection, texts need to be made accessible to a wide array of student populations, especially those with disabilities, through the integration of alternative means of expression to ensure that all students, regardless of ability levels, can access and benefit from these text experiences and demonstrate proficiency.

Understanding Complex Texts: Definition and Characteristics of Complex Texts

Complex texts are characterized by intricate structures, advanced vocabulary, and profound themes. They require readers to employ higher-order thinking skills to analyze and interpret the content. Some of the key characteristics (CDE 2014, pp. 71–72) include

* **vocabulary:** advanced and subject-specific terminology
* **sentence structure:** varied and sophisticated syntax
* **themes and ideas:** multilayered themes that promote critical thinking
* **text features:** use of literary devices, dense informational content, and abstract concepts

Selecting Texts for High School Students

High school students are expected to read and comprehend a varied array of texts and text types that prepare them for life after high school. This includes engaging with texts that present complex arguments, multiple viewpoints, and in-depth analyses of issues. According to the California ELA/Literacy standards, by the end of grade nine, students should read and comprehend informational texts, literature, and literary nonfiction in the grades nine through ten text complexity band proficiently, with embedded resources. By the end of grade ten, they should do so independently and proficiently (CDE 2014). Similarly, by the end of grades eleven and twelve, students are expected to read and comprehend texts at the high end of the grade eleven College and Career Readiness (CCR) text complexity band. It is important for students to understand any supports or resources they may need to reach proficiency (CDE 2014). The ELA/ELD Framework and this document include numerous examples of instructional approaches that help students with disabilities, English learners, advanced learners, and a range of other learners who may benefit from specialized teaching practices.

Considering Text Topics and Materials

Selecting the right texts for students is a crucial task that can significantly influence their learning outcomes. In high school, where students are preparing for the demands of life beyond high school, it is essential to choose texts that not only challenge them but also engage and inspire students as they prepare for the twenty-first century’s expanding literacy demands in postsecondary education and/or careers. Furthermore, it is critical to assume that all students, regardless of language need or disability status—including students with disabilities eligible for the California Alternate Assessment (CAA)—are given the opportunity to realize this right and be involved in learning experiences that prepare them for independence. The following criteria provide a framework for selecting complex texts that meet educational objectives and cater to the diverse strengths and needs of students in California.

Relevance to Curriculum

Texts derived from district-adopted curriculum should align with the course’s big ideas, academic standards, and learning objectives. Big Ideas are the central concepts, understandings, or areas of focus that represent what a student will be able to understand and do when taking a course. Ensuring that the materials are pertinent to the curriculum helps maintain a cohesive learning experience and supports students in meeting the required competencies while keeping competencies grounded in the context rigor of the text and big ideas of the course. Text sets, both with district-adopted curriculum and teacher-chosen supplemental texts, are the ideal vehicles for students to learn the course competencies. Text sets ensure a cohesive experience while also fostering students’ related content knowledge, vocabulary development, and motivation. Teachers might pair a text from the district-adopted materials with another text that is more relevant for students as a way to foster a connection to their interests, culture, and language assets. These materials then provide students with content and experiences relevant to their interests, perspectives, and identities to create alternative means of expression around their ability to show understanding of the standards.

Student Interests, Culture, and Language

Choosing texts that resonate with students’ experiences, culture, identities, and interests increases engagement and is especially helpful when, and if, students need support to persevere in reading complex texts because the texts themselves are motivating for the students. When students see a connection between their lives and the texts they are reading, their motivation and participation increase (Rao, Smith, and Lowrey 2017; Solberg 2019). Using texts that accurately reflect students’ cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds helps students see themselves in the curriculum and fosters a more inclusive classroom (CDE 2014, p. 64). Teachers’ knowledge of their students’ abilities and interests will enable them to provide appropriate guidance (CDE 2014).

Motivation and Engagement

Texts should be chosen to motivate students to read, think critically, and participate in discussions. Providing students with choices in literacy-related activities, texts, and even locations in the room can increase their engagement. Establishing meaningful and engaging content learning goals around the essential ideas of a discipline, along with the specific learning processes students use to access those ideas, promotes engagement (Kamil et al. 2008).

California’s Recommended Literature List

[The California Department of Education’s *Recommended Literature: Prekindergarten Through Grade Twelve*](https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/rl/) is a resource for teachers seeking high-quality, relevant texts for their students. The recommended literature list is a collection of fiction and nonfiction children’s books that are vetted via a committee and approved for posting by CDE. This annually updated, searchable database offers a wide range of books that entertain, inform, and introduce new ideas that support various curricular areas. Teachers can utilize this resource to find diverse and engaging literature by exploring searchable categories such as awards won, connections to standards, cultural designations, and literary genres. This allows teachers to find diverse and engaging literature tailored to the performance tasks they create. Another resource linked on the CDE recommended literature list page is [TeachingBooks.net](https://share.teachingbooks.net/QL52QOV) which provides resources teachers can use alongside other recommended titles to motivate, inspire, and engage students with the complex texts.

Considering Text Complexity

Understanding and evaluating text complexity is a critical component when selecting appropriate reading materials for students. Text complexity involves more than just the difficulty of the words and sentences; it encompasses various factors that influence a student’s ability to understand and engage with the text. When considering text complexity, educators should consider three primary measures: quantitative, qualitative, and reader and task considerations (CDE 2014, p. 71).

Quantitative Measures

Quantitative measures are the objective aspects of a text, such as word length and sentence complexity. They provide a numerical value that helps to gauge the overall difficulty of a text (CDE 2014, p. 73).

Qualitative Measures

These include the levels of meaning, structure, language conventionality, and knowledge demands of a text. Unlike quantitative measures, qualitative measures require a more nuanced evaluation of the text’s complexity. This involves analyzing the depth of ideas, the sophistication of the text’s structure, the conventionality of the language used, and the extent of background knowledge required to comprehend the text fully (CDE 2014, p. 71).

Reader and Task Considerations

This measure considers the specific characteristics of the students who are reading the text and the tasks they are performing. Students’ background knowledge, interests, and the complexity of the tasks they undertake play significant roles in how complex a text is for them. Variables such as the reader’s motivation, prior knowledge, and experiences can greatly influence their ability to understand a text. Additionally, the complexity of the tasks assigned and the questions posed should be considered to ensure the text is appropriate for the student’s level (CDE 2014, p. 74).

Embedding Resources to Support Text Comprehension

To effectively support students’ understanding of complex texts, educators can implement a variety of strategies and related resources that guide and enhance the learning process. These strategies provide the necessary support for students to engage with challenging materials to maintain the rigor of the standards, gradually building their skills and confidence to effectively apply alternative means of expression that satisfy ELA/ELD standards and their requirement to be delivered through a varied array of complex texts. Strategies for making texts accessible will support a wide range of student populations but are essential for including students with disabilities including those eligible for CAA, whose IEP-defined supplementary aids and resources often require educators to embed more personalized and flexible supports. In addition to the general strategies to promote access mentioned in table 1, general education- and special education-based educators need to work collaboratively to ensure more personalized adaptations defined within students’ IEPs are woven into instruction and assessment design.

Table 1 below (CDE 2014, Figure 2.10) describes specific types of strategies for supporting students with complex text. Again, the teacher is crucial to supporting students’ engagement with complex texts since all the supports require teachers to read texts in advance to determine where the challenges might lie for their students and choose the appropriate supports carefully and purposefully.

Table 1. Table Recreation of Figure 2.10 from the ELA/ELD Framework

| Strategies | Teachers support *all* students’ understanding of complex text by… | *Additional, amplified, or differentiated* support for linguistically diverse learners may include… |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Background knowledge | leveraging students’ existing background knowledge | drawing on primary language and home culture to make connections with existing background knowledge  developing students’ awareness that their background knowledge may *live* in another language or culture |
| Comprehension strategies | teaching and modeling—through thinking aloud and explicit reference to strategies—how to make meaning from the text using specific reading comprehension strategies (for example, questioning, visualizing)  providing multiple opportunities to employ learned comprehension strategies | emphasizing a clear focus on the goal of reading as meaning-making (with fluent decoding an important skill) while multilingual learners are still learning to communicate through English |
| Vocabulary | explicitly teaching vocabulary critical to understanding and developing academic vocabulary over time  explicitly teaching how to use morphological knowledge and context clues to derive the meaning of new words as they are encountered | explicitly teaching particular cognates and developing cognate awareness  making morphological relationships between languages transparent (for example, word endings for nouns in Spanish,*-dad, -ión, -ía, -encia*) that have English counterparts *(-ty,  -tion/-sion, -y, -ence/ -ency*) |
| Text organization and grammatical structures | explicitly teaching and discussing text organization, text features, and other language resources, such as grammatical structures (for example, complex sentences) and how to analyze them to support comprehension | delving deeper into text organization and grammatical features in texts that are new or challenging and necessary to understand to build content knowledge  drawing attention to grammatical differences between the primary language and English (for example, word order differences) |
| Discussions | engaging students in peer discussions—both brief and extended—to promote collaborative sense-making of text and opportunities to use newly acquired vocabulary | structuring discussions that promote equitable participation, academic discourse, and the strategic use of new grammatical structures and specific vocabulary |
| Sequencing | systematically sequencing texts and tasks so that they build upon one another  continuing to model close or analytical reading of complex texts during teacher read alouds while also ensuring students develop proficiency in reading complex texts themselves | focusing on the language demands of texts, particularly those that may be especially difficult for multilingual learners  carefully sequencing tasks to build understanding and effective use of the language in texts |
| Rereading | rereading the text or selected passages to look for answers to questions or clarify points of confusion | rereading the text to build an understanding of ideas and language incrementally (for example, beginning with literal comprehension questions on initial readings and moving to inferential and analytical comprehension questions on subsequent reads)  repeated exposure to rich language over time, focusing on a particular language (for example, different vocabulary) during each reading |
| Tools | teaching students to develop outlines, charts, diagrams, graphic organizers, or other tools to summarize and synthesize content  teaching students to annotate text (mark text and make notes) for specific elements (for example, confusing vocabulary, main ideas, evidence) | explicitly modeling how to use the outlines or graphic organizers to analyze or discuss a model text and providing guided practice for students before they use the tools independently  using the tools as a scaffold for discussions or writing |
| Writing | teaching students to return to the text as they write in response to the text and providing them with models and feedback | providing opportunities for students to talk about their ideas with a peer before (or after) writing  providing written language models (for example, charts of important words or powerful sentences)  providing reference frames (for example, sentence, paragraph, and text organization frames), as appropriate |

Conclusion

In conclusion, this practice guide emphasizes the importance of selecting and scaffolding complex texts when creating learning experiences for students, as outlined in the California *2014 English Language Arts/English Language Development Framework (ELA/ELD Framework*). Teachers have the opportunity and responsibility to thoughtfully select a wide array of complex texts across diverse perspectives they use as teaching vehicles for California’s ELA/Literacy and ELD standards. Furthermore, by integrating choice through alternative means of expression in how students show their understanding of complex texts, teachers create inclusive, culturally responsive teaching and student agency—elements of instruction that are essential for students with disabilities. This practice brief provides clear and practical ways teachers can choose complex texts and scaffolds that are aligned with the ELA/ELD Framework goals for students’ learning context: integrated, motivating, engaging, respectful, and intellectually challenging (CDE 2014, pp. 61–67).

**References**

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